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Visual Criticism and Children's Literature

INTRODUCTION

Imagine an audience sitting enthralled as a storyteller unfolds a picture book tale. Pictures add form and feeling, color and depth as the words pour forth. The participants in this event have different responses. Some do not move their eyes from the pictures for a moment. Others look first to the pictures, then back to the face of the narrator in a continual, rhythmic movement. Still others, further back in the group, take in the entire event, teller, image, and audience, but they see the smallest detail and remember it. For all present, the event takes on a magical quality. Each participant is called upon to engage in interchange of intellect and emotion, an experience that is at once communal as well as individual and that transcends time and place. Indeed, the scene is timeless. It could take place in front of the cave paintings at Lascaux 15,000 years ago or in the Warlpiri culture in the western Australian desert today.

Those in the field of library science or education are more likely to recognize it as a scene from the library or classroom story time. But the importance of this type of visual/verbal experience is no less powerful because it is mainly experienced by children in Western culture. Suzanne Langer (1942) has argued that, "Image-making is . . . the mode of our untutored thinking, and stories are its earliest products" (p. 145). The long tradition of the picture book, then, grows out of some essential human characteristic that over the centuries has been the result of a cultural need to represent some basic aspect of the individual and the race through image and myth, and an artist's need to convey some

meaning through visual symbols (Kiefer, 1989). In ensuing years, the changing needs of society, as reflected in the culture of a given age, have determined the content of the picture book and designated the audience, while technological advances have allowed the medium of the experience to expand beyond the wall of a cave or the floor of the desert to laser reproductions of all manner of original works, bound in paper between the covers of a book.

Moreover, just as the cave paintings of Lascaux, the illuminated manuscripts of the Middle Ages, and the "dreamings" of Australian aborigines are usually the province of art historians, today's picture books are art objects and must be subject to a similar visual criticism. For a picture book relies as much or more on visual meaning as it does on verbal meaning.

CRITICISM AND PICTURE BOOKS

Marantz (1977), for example, has argued that picture books are not literature, that is, word-dominated creations, but rather a form of visual art that must be experienced as a visual/verbal entity. Bader (1976) suggests that the picture book is an art form that "hinges on the interdependence of pictures and words, on the simultaneous display of two facing pages, and on the drama of the turning of the page" (p. 1). The fact that with picture books we are dealing at the very least with two different codes or systems of communication complicates a task that even within the realms of purely visual or purely verbal criticism is always a difficult one. Often critics attempt to relate the picture book to conventions of criticism in one or the other discipline instead of dealing with the art of the picture book as a separate and unique entity. For years, reviewers of picture books have been taken to task for neglecting the pictures or relegating discussion of art elements to a few stock phrases or words. More recently, theories of visual literacy have been developed, but too often these liken the art to verbal elements or treat reading pictures as akin to reading words or reading signs. On the other hand, some scholars have categorized the illustrations in books according to traditional categories of art history, for example, impressionistic, expressionistic, realistic, or abstract and have thus suggested that styles of illustrations are synonymous with styles of painting.

Useful theories regarding the art of the picture book have, I believe, developed out of the field of semiotic theory. In this context, scholars have developed theories of various relationships of pictures and text. Golden (1990), for example, proposes five different relationships between illustrations and text in picture books. In three of these relationships,

she argues, the illustrations play a complementary, extending, or highlighting role, but the text can be read separate from the pictures without any essential loss of meaning. In the other two relationships that she suggests, the illustrations either provide information crucial to the written text or clarify and go beyond information in the words. Here the pictures must be present if all information is to be obtained.

Nodelman (1988) has suggested that the relationship between pictures and text is always an ironic one, that is, "the words tell us what the pictures do not show, and the pictures show us what the words do not tell" (p. 222). He argues, for example that

when words and pictures combine, irony emerges from the way in which the incompleteness of each is revealed by the differing incompleteness of the other. The theoretically "fierce bad rabbit" in Beatrix Potter's book of that name looks soft and cuddly, anything but the evil creature that the text refers to. (p. 223)

While an understanding of verbal/pictorial relationships might help us to "deconstruct" a particular picture book, however, it does not necessarily move us to a theory of criticism. The pictures in *Titch* (Hutchins, 1971), which according to Golden function almost as a caption, are no less effective than the pictures in *Dr. DeSoto* (Steig, 1982), which are necessary to an understanding of the written text. I would argue, with Langer, that the fabric of *meaning* is at the essence of any art form. Thus, in setting forth a theory of visual criticism in picture books, it seems important to understand how it is that the art conveys meaning rather than just to categorize the pictures according to periods of art history or to identify their relationship to text.

THE AESTHETIC NATURE OF THE PICTURE BOOK

In considering any mode of communication, visual, verbal, or an interaction between the two, it is important to understand how meaning is expressed and understood within that form. While both language and visual art have a meaning-expressing potential, the two are not identical and cannot be matched at a "word" or "sentence" level. Furthermore, the result of engagements with visual and verbal texts may be very different. Nodelman (1988) suggests, for example, "that the visual spaces depicted in pictures imply time and that the temporal sequences depicted in words imply space" (p. 243). Gombrich (1982) argues that while both language and visual images have the capacity to express, arouse, and describe, the visual image is most effective in evoking emotions while it is unable to match "the statement function of language" (p. 138).

On the other hand, when considering how meaning is expressed, verbal and visual art have much in common. Both the author and the

artist have elements available for conveying meaning. The author uses sounds and words, the phonetic and morphemic systems of language. The artist uses line, shape, color, value, and texture, the elements of art. Both language and art have syntactic and semantic properties. Hellman (1977), for example, argues that we recognize the syntactic properties of art, such as the organization of lines and color, but also the semantic properties in which lines and colors evoke moods such as quiet, warm, or angry. In addition, authors and artists have in common principles of organization which both refer to as composition. Moreover, aspects of composition such as balance, rhythm, and pattern are common to both. Finally, the word *style* is applied to the product created as a result of authors' or artists' choices of these elements and principles. The fact that the concept of style is applied to both literature and art and that it is linked with the expression of meaning makes style a proper basis for a theory of visual criticism in picture books.

STYLE IN ART

Style as the term is used in art has been the subject of considerable debate, just as it has been in literary fields. The term *style* has been used to describe the work of individuals as well as that of cultures and eras. Novitz (1976) attempted to clarify the term by differentiating between pictorial styles, artistic styles, and personal styles. Pictorial styles, he explains, are distinguished by certain "widely accepted procedures of depicting . . . called 'umbrella' conventions" (p. 336). Falling in this category would be the use of perspective or impressionistic perceptions. That is, artists of the early Renaissance began using newly discovered formulas of perspective, while impressionist painters were those who were interested in the immediate image captured by the eye before the brain had time to clarify or define it. On the other hand, artistic styles might involve changes in emphasis or in subject matter but not in overall methods of depicting—the Renaissance style as opposed to mannerism or the movement from religious or classical subject matter of the Renaissance to the homey interiors of Dutch genre painting. Finally, individuals might work in the same pictorial and artistic styles, but idiosyncratic features would help distinguish one artist's picture from another—Michelangelo from Raphael or Monet from Pissarro.

A point of consensus in discussions of style in art seems to be the dual quality of style. Wolfflin (1932) referred to "the double root of style"; Hellman (1977) discusses *exemplified* and *expressed* properties (syntactic and semantic). Thus, any consideration of style must consider

not only the formal objective properties of style but those subjective properties that lead to an expression of meaning.

Genova (1979) proposed a "meaning-expressing model" for style, acknowledging "a variety of sources ranging from psychological to cultural and aesthetic ones," but emphasizing that style was the result of unconscious as well as conscious choices (p. 324). Her crucial point, however, was that style is symbolic of meaning. The two are "inextricably interwoven; they reflect, express and constitute each other," she argued (p. 323).

Following these understandings, then, style might be defined most simply as "manner of expressing." The meaning of the word "express," to make known, reveal, show, is in keeping with the dual nature of style. The word "manner" can be understood to encompass all the conscious as well as unconscious choices the artist embraces in order to "make known." Aspects of style such as formal elements, techniques, and pictorial conventions, then, represent a field of choices available to the artist in order to accomplish the primary purpose of expressing meaning.

STYLE IN PICTURE BOOKS

Although I have been discussing a theory of style that grows out of the field of visual art, these understandings—with some modifications and additions—may be applied to the art of picture books. Both the painter and the illustrator choose elements of art, principles of composition, and historical and cultural conventions that may be highly effective in expressing meaning. However, in executing a painting, an artist may choose to envision a story, capture a moment in history or time, explore an intellectual vision, or express some purely inner feeling with little care or concern for how an audience will perceive the finished product. The illustrator, on the other hand, is bound to a specific idea or narrative, with some intent, at least, to convey a specific meaning to an audience. Moreover, while the painter is concerned with a single image on one pictorial plane, the illustrator is bound to a sequence of images, sometimes in the company of written text, sometimes not. Finally, while the painter is faced with choices of media, for example, oil or acrylic, the illustrator must consider, in addition, not only original media but also other technical choices inherent in the reproduction of the work within the covers of a book. These technical choices may also be expressive of meaning and add to or detract from the overall aesthetic experience possible with a given book.

Marantz (1977) has argued that "art objects are important because they have the potential for producing a transcendental experience, a

state of mind where new and personal meanings can take shape" (p. 151). This, I believe, is the essence of the aesthetic experience possible as a result of a good picture book. In the remainder of this paper, I will explore several categories of stylistic choices that grow out of the above understandings, attempting to show how they apply to the art of illustration and add to or affect the quality of the picture book and the overall aesthetic experience.

In judging the quality of a picture book, the critic must begin with the verbal text, or in the case of a concept book or wordless picture book, with the idea or theme of the book. This is, in most cases, where the artist begins. Even when artists are illustrating their own work, they seldom create the pictures first and then write the text. Once we have some idea of the theme of the book, the motifs and moods, the characters, setting, and the events, we can go on to evaluate how well the artist has chosen artistic elements, principles, and conventions to convey those meanings visually, and how those artistic or stylistic choices have contributed to the overall aesthetic experience of the book.

It is interesting to note that in setting forth the criteria for awarding the Caldecott medal given for the most distinguished work of illustration published in the United States in a given year, the board of the Association of Library Services to Children (Peltola, 1980) suggests that

each book is to be considered as a picture book. The committee is to make its decision primarily on the illustrations, but other components of a book are to be considered especially when they make a book less effective as a children's picture book. Such components might include the written text, the overall design of the book, etc. (p. 4)

I would argue that the written text and the design are integral parts of the picture book and must be evaluated along with the illustrations.

To a lesser extent perhaps, the critic must also keep in mind the "implied reader" (Iser, 1978) or viewer when evaluating the art of the picture book. Iser argues that there is always a negotiation of insight between the author (artist) and reader (viewer). It is in this co-construction of meaning that the illustrator of picture books invites the reader to participate. F. H. Langman (1967) suggested that to judge the effectiveness of the work, we must consider how the work itself "implies the kind of reader to whom it is addressed. . ." (p. 84). Thus, in evaluating a picture book, we may also need to consider the age and experience of the child who is the implied reader.

First and foremost, however, we must consider the range of choices available to the artist in expressing meaning. These stylistic choices can be categorized by the elements and principles of art, the technical choices relating to book production, and the historical and cultural conventions of depicting. In considering the range of these choices, we must consider not only their formal properties but also the ways

in which they can add to the intellectual understanding and emotional engagement with the book.

THE ELEMENTS AND PRINCIPLES OF ART

While the elements and principles of art have been variously identified, line, shape, color, texture, and value are generally accepted as the basic elements with which the illustrator works. Under principles of organization, or the ways in which the artist brings these elements together, can be included compositional precepts such as eye movement, balance, rhythm, and pattern.

Line is the most commonly found element in picture books, perhaps because, as MacCann and Richard (1973) suggest, it is the "traditional mode of graphic illustration" (p. 36). Lines have great expressive potential. They can convey repose when horizontal, stability when vertical, and movement when diagonal. Angular lines can create a feeling of excitement or tension, while curving lines often express more rhythmic, peaceful qualities. The quality of line can be altered so that thin lines may appear fragile and delicate and thick lines can convey strength and weight.

We find the element of line effectively used to convey meaning in many picture books. In *Willie's Fire Engine*, for example, Charles Keeping (1980) uses contrasting thickness to set up a tension between his characters and their circumstances. His main characters are children trapped in an urban ghetto, perhaps with little hope of breaking out. Keeping draws them in thin, very delicate lines, suggesting fragility, but sets them in front of a black gate whose thick verticals resemble a set of prison bars. The diagonals become slashes across the page, crossing out any chance of escape. This is echoed in the lighter diagonals to the upper right, which form repeated x's and add further tension to the scene.

A very different use of line is found in *The Napping House* (Wood, 1984). Here, Don Wood uses short, thick vertical lines of a picket fence to suggest stable tranquillity. They are not frightening like Keeping's verticals because they are executed in softened shades of blue-white and because they are placed low on the page so as not to threaten. In covering the top of the fence with rose bushes, Wood creates an outline that suggests the rhythmic snoring of the sleepers first seen on the cover, as well as the soft curves of their bodies, and effectively leads the eye across the title and copyright pages. Without the curving line provided by the bushes, the picket fence would have ended in points, disturbing the quiet mood of the two pages.

When lines enclose space, as with the bushes in *The Napping House*, they create shapes, and as with line, the element of space is also capable of expressing meaning. Rounded or curving shapes are called

biomorphic because they resemble living organisms. The circle in particular is a line endlessly meeting itself and thus symbolizes continuity and the eternal. Wood has used biomorphic shapes in *The Napping House* to convey a mood of tranquillity and gentle humor as well as the renewal found in restful sleep. The repetition of circles, ovals, and half circles throughout the book echoes the rhythm established in the early pages and also evokes circadian rhythms of biological life. There is not a sharp or a straight edge anywhere in the book to jar this effect; even the wooden furniture curves in defiance of reality.

Shapes with sharp edges and points, on the other hand, can convey excitement, action, tension, or even pain. Janina Domanska's use of abstracted, colorful shapes to retell *The Bremen Town Musicians* (Grimm, 1980) is a fine choice to convey the mournful quality of the animals' plight as each is threatened by illness or death. Later these shapes convincingly portray the nastiness of the robbers and the raucous victory of the animals as they trick these villains.

Mordicai Gerstein (1987) makes use of both geometric and biomorphic shapes in *The Mountains of Tibet*. To tell the life story of the Tibetan woodcutter, Gerstein places the pictures within squares, a perfect geometric shape, but like life, a square has sharp edges and points. When the woodcutter dies, however, the square changes to a circle, the universal symbol of eternity. Then he is presented with choices for another life, all enclosed within the shape of a circle. When he decides to return to the mountains of Tibet to live another life, he is reborn as a girl into a square-shaped picture. Gerstein artfully creates a metaphor for life and death that could never be expressed so powerfully with words alone.

The use of the element of shape can also create some interesting figure-ground relationships. Ann Jonas (1983) often works the background shapes in her two-dimensional pictorial spaces into major aspects of the design. This is particularly true in *Round Trip*, where the viewer must perceive the pure black and white shapes as either background or foreground and then switch when the book is turned upside-down. The interchange between the two is the essence of visual play in the book. Molly Bang (1980) takes this interplay of background and foreground shapes even further in *The Grey Lady and the Strawberry Snatcher*. Here the reversal of traditional shape or spatial relationships heightens the nightmare-like quality of the story. Moreover, the shapes formed by the larger areas of empty space set up lively tensions between the two characters.

Color is one of the most expressive of the elements. Colors can convey temperature (warm or cold) or emotion (red for anger or blue for melancholy). They are often associated with personality traits (purple for royalty, pink for femininity) and as such can lead to cultural

stereotypes. In mainstream American culture, for example, the hero has often been portrayed in white and the villain in black. In addition, the intensity of a color (its brightness or dullness) as well as the ways in which colors are combined (color schemes) can also effect mood and evoke meaning.

For example, the early pictures in *Willie's Fire Engine* are dull brownish-gray, strengthening the dismal mood set up by Keeping's use of line. Later, however, as Willie's dream allows him to escape into the role of hero, Keeping shifts to bright reds and oranges. These colors not only represent the fire that Willie is rushing off to but also provide a glimpse of the heightened emotion of his inner feelings. Moreover, the change occurs at the very moment of climax of the story, and thus the colors underscore this literary element like a crash of cymbals in the finale of a symphony.

In *The Napping House*, Wood begins the story with a monochromatic color scheme, the use of single or closely related hues. The blues and purples of the early pages are further softened by the addition of gray, which adds to the restful mood of a gentle slumber. By the end of the book, however, when everyone is awakened by the restless flea, the scheme has changed to complementary, the use of colors opposite each other on the color wheel. The use of color complements not only makes each color appear brighter but also sends a burst of energy into the scene. Finally, on the end pages at the back of the book, the gray has been removed to produce a bright and cheerful robin's egg blue, as fully alive as a fresh spring morning.

In *The Napping House*, many will recognize the possible influence of Uri Shulevitz's (1974) *Dawn*, which used, to great effect, a similar movement from monochromatic to complementary scheme. In a later work, *Toddlecreek Post Office*, Shulevitz (1990) again manipulates color schemes effectively. The illustrations in this story about the loss of community have an overall blue tone made possible by specially tinted paper Shulevitz used for the original art. The blue anticipates the sad climax from the first pages, yet initially the addition of oranges and reds lends a sense of warmth to the scenes of life that center around a tiny village post office. When the postmistress who will close down this rural outpost arrives, however, suddenly the warm colors are removed leaving, cold, dark blues that chill our hearts.

Shulevitz's books also illustrate how contrast and mood can be manipulated in another way in art through the use of the element of value, the amount of light and dark tones. Value is easiest to recognize when illustrations are executed in black and white but is also a factor in illustrations executed in full color. When there is little contrast between light and dark, the mood of the picture may be either serene

or brooding. Note, for example, Roger Duvoisin's *Hide and Seek Fog* (Tresselt, 1965) or Paul Zelinsky's *Hansel and Gretel* (Lesser, 1984).

On the other hand, with strong contrast between light and dark, the mood is often one of excitement or high drama. When value is used to define shapes, they take on a three-dimensional quality and become more lifelike. Lloyd Bloom's illustrations for Molly Chaffin's (1980) *We Be Warm Till Springtime Come* show how strongly contrasting values not only can breathe life into a picture but also can extend a message of warmth, even without color. In books such as *Jumanji*, Chris Van Allsburg (1981) uses contrasting values to convey the feeling that the pictures might actually get up and move off the page. Because our brain knows that the surface is two-dimensional, however, this factor heightens the touch of mystery or absurdity that seems to characterize Van Allsburg's work.

John Steptoe (1987) created strong contrast between light and dark in *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters*. This contrast echoes the theme of opposites that is the essence of the story. Moreover, the contrasting values convey a sense of royal stature to the figures; in fact, the first view of the Prince whom Nyasha will marry almost looks like it was carved out of marble. Here the perfect male form further ennoble the people of whom Steptoe writes and links this great African civilization to the glories of ancient Greece.

In *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters*, Steptoe also makes effective use of another element of art, the element of texture. Texture as an element is less noticeable in picture books because it can only be implied on the two-dimensional surface of the book's page. Steptoe artfully extends his theme of contrast between the two sisters and, more subtly, the contrast of id and ego within one personality by executing the illustrations in cross-hatching. This painstaking use of tiny lines in opposition to each other, often in opposing colors, characterizes all the drawings in the book and sets up a subtle feeling of movement or tension on each page. Moreover, Steptoe leaves areas of pure white on each double-page spread. Thus, the theme of contrasts is further reinforced by the contrast between the rough cross-hatching and the shiny, smooth whiteness of the book's paper.

In good picture books like these, no single element exists apart from the others. Rather, the illustrator will use principles of composition to unify elements on each page and on each succeeding page. In working with the arrangement of elements on each page, including the printed type, the artist will try to obtain an effective balance between unity and variety and to create certain visual patterns that may be carried on from page to page. Illustrators will try to ensure that the eye moves from one part of each double-page spread to another, both within the picture and between the picture and any printed text. This will in turn

set up a subtle rhythm that can be carried on throughout the book. All of these choices can further express the visual meanings conveyed by the elements and contribute to a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.

Charles Keeping has carefully considered these principles of design in *Willie's Fire Engine*. In the early pages of the book, the dullness of Willie's life is echoed in the layout of the pictures on the first two double-page spreads. On the left-hand page, we see a far shot of Willie's city with a golden castle far in the distance, out of his reach. On the facing page, we see a close-up of Willie's tenement building. As we turn the page, we see a picture of Willie inside in his room. On the right, we see Willie outdoors with the milkman, the only "hero" he knows. These four single pages set up a dull plodding echo that in their tones and use of line are reflections of the sameness of Willie's life. On the following pages, the two views are fragmented into four scenes and perhaps represent Willie's broken hopes. As Willie meets a girl who will help him on his quest, however, Keeping begins to vary the shapes and number of vignettes on each double-page spread, increasing the tension and action just as the colors begin to brighten and the lines to flow. The design of the book thus increases the emotional intensity almost unbearably until finally the brilliant reds of the fire engine burst across a double-page spread. Then the scenes once again get smaller and more numerous as the denouement occurs. The colors remain intense, however, and even when we see, on the last page, that Willie has been dreaming, the changed colors and subjects of the pictures on his wall provide a message of hope and seem to indicate that his dreams may enhance his life.

For Verna Aardema's (1981) retelling of *Bringing the Rain to Kapiti Plain*, Beatriz Vidal has used the principles of variety and unity to set up a visual pattern that echoes the verbal refrains of the text: "This is the great Kapiti Plain, all fresh and green from the African rains." The clear poetic beat of this cumulative tale is echoed and enlivened by Vidal's design. Beginning on the title page, she alternates the placement of blocks of type with cloud and earth images from left to right. To vary the symmetry of this pattern, however, she inserts a double spread where the shapes of cloud and earth enlarge to cover the entire two pages. Variations on this pattern are carried out through the book, adding interest to text and image that might otherwise have become too static. In addition, the visual rhythms set up in this way are so strong that they recall the beat of an African drum and further enhance the overall meaning and integrity of the book.

TECHNICAL CHOICES RELATING TO BOOK PRODUCTION

While the illustrator's choices of the elements and principles of art can have the most profound effect on the aesthetic experience we

have with a given book, there are aspects of book production that can also convey subtle meanings and perhaps deepen that experience.

End pages, for example, are necessary in all books, but many artists use them as important introductions to the story. Paul Zelinsky created grandiose landscapes to provide the setting for a version of *Hansel and Gretel* (Lesser, 1984). These pictures pull the reader into his Renaissance setting immediately and then bring the story to closure. They provide a visual framing device that serves the same purpose as a "once upon a time" and "they lived happily ever after," the classic signals of narrative structure. In another approach, Nonny Hogrogian uses the end pages to highlight an important motif in her version of the Grimms' (1981a) *Cinderella*. She includes multiple views of a hazelnut twig, a gift from Cinderella's father that will grow on her mother's grave and provide the magic that transforms her life.

The artist's choice of original media may also affect the mood and validity of the book's theme. Although what we see in a picture book is a reproduction of the artist's finished work and should be evaluated as such (just as we evaluate an etching or lithograph and not the original metal plate or stone), the quality of the original media can enhance or interfere with visual meaning. In *Rain Rain Rivers*, for example, Shulevitz's (1969) choice of transparent watercolor echoes the book's title and theme and allows the white of the page to show through as if we were seeing light reflected in a rainy puddle. Van Allsburg's choice of conté pencil to execute the original pictures in *Jumanji* reproduces well and combines with the choice of a matte, rather rough paper stock in the book to convey an air of mysterious smokiness. We almost feel as if the pencil dust might rub off on our fingers as we touch the page, just as the game comes to life for the children.

We might compare two versions of the same tale to see how choice of original media changes the meaning of a book. In the 1968 edition of Jane Yolen's *Greyling*, a story set in and near the seas of Scotland, William Stobb's use of transparent paint conveys the watery realm of the selkie, or seal, transformed into human form. The flowing brush strokes allowed by the medium help to move the story along visually and heighten the stormy climax. In the 1991 version, David Ray has chosen acrylic paint, which he uses thickly, creating a texture that more closely resembles oil or oil pastels. While this medium gives more solid form to the seal turned human and provides a different visual emphasis to the story, it seems to turn the overall mood static. The watery forms are no longer fluid but seem changed into stone, and somehow the story loses its emotional impact.

Another technical choice that is unique to book production is the typeface in which the title and written text will be printed. Not only are the styles of typography important to the visual effect of the book

but also the white spaces between the letters. Eric Carle's (1977) choice of a clean, sans serif type for *The Grouchy Lady Bug* echoes and balances the sharp edges of his cutout shapes. A more elaborate typography was chosen for Sidjakov's illustrations in *Baboushka and the Three Kings* (Robbins, 1960) and becomes part of the linear design of the book. In Fred Marcellino's version of *Puss in Boots* (Perrault, 1990), the typeface not only mirrors the ornate fussiness of a French court but also functions as part of the overall visual design through its size and color.

The artist's point of view can extend or heighten the overall meaning of the book. In many books, artists have used point of view like the lens of a camera to zoom in on subjects at emotional moments, as does Charles Keeping in *Willie's Fire Engine* or Donald Carrick (1981) in *Ben and the Porcupine*. Shulevitz moves the viewer from close-ups to long shots in *Dawn* in order to emphasize majestic views of the natural landscape. To relieve the sameness of repetition of verbal text and visual setting in *The Napping House*, Wood subtly moves the eye up the wall of the room so that eventually we are looking down on the scene from a bird's-eye view. Van Allsburg also changes perspective or point of view in *Jumanji* to add variety to what might have been visual monotony of pictures always placed on the right-hand page.

The artist's choice of pictorial content can be essential to the book's overall meaning and may be the most important of technical choices. While many artists may choose to represent or echo the verbal text of a book, the aesthetic experience is enhanced when the artist brings something extra to the scene. For example, in *Julius, The Baby of the World*, Kevin Henkes' (1990) illustrations add to the sense of contrast between the parent's love for the new baby brother and sister Lilly's jealousy. The pictures contradict the objective tone of the words and reflect Lilly's intense emotional feelings at the same time that they add a strong note of humor to the story, acknowledging the young child's right to those feelings and accepting them with warmth rather than rejection.

Julie Vivas' (1986) interpretation of *The Nativity* conveys a similar sense of warmth and wonder; a familiar yet often coldly formal verbal story is made at once human and personal when the characters are viewed through the naive but pure eyes of a child. On the other hand, Trina Schart Hyman brings psychological darkness to her version of *Snow White* (Grimm, 1974) by showing the young and voluptuous stepmother's descent into madness. The familiar tale becomes entirely new through Hyman's pictorial choices, including the objects in the rooms and the faces on the magic mirror.

Comparing Hyman's version of *Snow White* to Nancy Burkert's illustrations (Grimm, 1972) shows how pictorial content and point of view can combine to convey very different meanings. For example, while

Hyman fully develops the character of the stepmother through the pictures, Nancy Burkert never shows us the stepmother's face. Moreover, in Hyman's version, we are immediately drawn into the tale with dark, flowing lines and shapes. In our first view of Snow White's mother, we are in the room with her as she pricks her finger, the red drops of blood visible on the snow on the window sill. Burkert's version begins much more formally. Regular, geometric shapes on the end pages convey a feeling of stately objectivity, as does the rectangular shape of the mirror placed squarely in the middle of the title page. In this version, we see Snow White's mother from outside the castle, and while she may have pricked her finger, we have no visual evidence of blood. Thus, we are safely distanced from the emotional intensity of the story. Unlike Hyman's version, which becomes a story of mother-daughter conflict resulting in the utter downfall of an evil personality through her own failings, Burkert gives us the story of an innocent child whose escape from evil is brought about by others. Both versions are powerful in their own ways, and both show how far beyond the verbal elements of text an artist can bring us.

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONVENTIONS

The last category of stylistic choices available to an artist concerns the pictorial conventions associated with particular times or peoples. In the past, reviewers have attempted to categorize the art of today's picture books according to accepted categories of art history, such as realism, impressionism, or nonobjective art. This does little to extend our understanding of a book's quality or of how the artist has chosen to express meaning. Moreover, picture books do not always fit neatly into these pictorial categories. However, if we recall Novitz's (1976) suggestion that certain pictorial conventions are accepted as procedures for depicting, we might look at these umbrella conventions, be they historical or cultural, as another range of choices available to the illustrator for expressing meaning.

For example, early Christian art is characterized by the need for a clear, uniform message to a mostly illiterate audience. This need to convey readily recognized symbols and motifs transcended individualistic portrayals. Many illustrators have thus chosen conventions from this historical period to convey stories and songs associated with this broad time period. Janina Domanska (1975) echoes the stained glass windows of Romanesque churches to bring the Christmas carol *Din Dan Don It's Christmas* to book form. Juan Wijngaard, in *Sir Gawain and the Loathly Lady* (Hastings, 1985), and Trina Schart Hyman, in *St. George and the Dragon* (Hodges, 1984), have both used conventions of

illuminated manuscripts to bring ancient tales to life by associating the time of the original tales with the art of that period.

We can find similar use of a broad range of historical conventions chosen effectively by many picture book illustrators, from Paul Zelinsky's borrowing of Renaissance trends toward dramatic lighting and emphasis on form and space to retell *Hansel and Gretel*, to Anthony Browne's use of conventions of surrealism to convey his psychologically deep stories (Grimm, 1981b).

Other artists may borrow conventions that have come to be associated with particular cultures over time. Thus Paul Goble makes use of styles found in the buffalo hide paintings of Northern Plains Indians to retell their legends and tales. Likewise, in their stories with Chinese or Asian settings or roots, Ed Young (Louie, 1982) and Demi (1991) have effectively used techniques of Chinese art, which is characterized by the exploration of linear effects and the de-emphasis of realism.

In all these cases, the theme of the book, its setting in time and place, and its overall effect is strengthened by the artist's choice of certain historical or cultural conventions. We must judge the book not as to whether the illustrations match the definition of a particular period or culture but as to whether the artist has chosen those elements that enhance and extend the meaning of the book for today's reader.

CONCLUSION

Here then is a theory of visual criticism, based on understandings from the field of aesthetics and art criticism, that lends itself to evaluating picture books. The theory grows out of a firm belief that we must understand how the illustrator chooses to convey meaning, and it seeks to explore or categorize the range of choices possible for illustrators of picture books in accomplishing that task. This theory can form the basis for further exploration of the art in picture books through fine works such as Joseph Schwarcz's (1982) *Ways of the Illustrator* and *The Picture Book Comes of Age* (Schwarcz & Schwarcz, 1990), Perry Nodleman's (1988) *Words about Pictures*, or Molly Bang's (1991) *Picture This*. These and other books are particularly useful for understanding the works of selected illustrators in greater depth.

Understanding the art of the picture book in terms of stylistic choices can provide a useful basis for looking at children's responses to the art of the picture book. My own research with children has indicated that in classrooms where teachers provide many opportunities for looking at picture books and for responding to them in a variety of ways, children seem to move naturally toward understanding that the

artist's choices are meant to convey visual meaning and that these choices evoke an emotional response. Children also seem to be capable of identifying more universal conventions of art in their own terms, classifying Sendak's (1981) illustrations for *Outside Over There*, for example, as "from the bible" or "lushy" and Van Allsburg's pictures as "like clay" or "like stone" (Kiefer, 1986).

Langer (1953) has argued that artwork is an expression of the artist's idea,

i.e. something that takes shape as he articulates an envisagement of realities which discursive language cannot properly express. What he makes is a symbol—primarily a symbol to capture and hold his own imagination of organized feeling, the rhythms of life, the forms of emotion. (p. 392)

I believe it is this powerful quality of the visual art of the picture book that gives rise to the deepest responses on the part of all readers, adults or children. Thus, the visual expression of meaning and the resulting emotional experience made possible by that expression should be paramount in evaluating picture books. When the right choices are made by the artist, children of all ages will bring, in response, their own understandings to the work in ways that will not only develop their visual literacy but will also deepen their aesthetic understanding.

APPENDIX

THE ARTIST'S CHOICES IN EXPRESSING MEANING:
CRITERIA FOR EVALUATING PICTURE BOOKS

Design Choices

1. The *elements* of design (line, shape, color, value, and texture) are chosen for their expressive qualities.
 - Lines and shapes convey action, rhythm; they can be strong and solid or diminutive and quick.
 - Colors convey mood, emotions.
 - Value creates contrast, highly dramatic or soothing effects.
 - Texture conveys tension, adds interest or movement.
2. The *principles* of design or composition (balance, rhythm, repetition, variety in unity, eye movement) are chosen to tie individual pages into a complete whole that reinforces the overall meaning of the book.
 - Layout and size of pictures carry the eye from page to page and create a rhythm in keeping with the meaning of the book.
 - Pictures and printed text are well balanced and create a pleasing pattern.
 - Elements of design are used to create variety in unity.

Technical Choices

1. Original media, end papers, paper stock, and typography are chosen to strengthen ideas or story.
 - Choice of watercolor, acrylics, pencil, or print is in keeping with the mood of the story or concept.
 - Typeface appropriate to type of book or story.
 - End papers prepare the reader by setting the mood, giving a preview, or complementing the illustrations.
 - The paper itself is in keeping with original media (acrylic on shiny paper, watercolor or pencil on a matte finish).
2. Pictorial content and the artist's point of view extend and enhance the story or concept.
 - Choice of what to include in the picture is appropriate to the story and adds new dimensions, new or additional meanings.
 - Pictures add information and help us see ideas in new ways.
 - Close-ups, traditional perspective, worm's-eye view, or bird's-eye view are chosen to lend excitement, drama, and interest to the story.

Choices of Historical or Cultural Conventions

1. Pictorial conventions are borrowed from styles of art throughout history to enhance and extend the meaning of the story or concept.
 - Aspects of early Christian art, Renaissance painting, French impressionism, etc., are used to convey mood and meaning.
2. Pictorial conventions are borrowed from particular cultural groups to enhance meaning.
 - Folk motifs or styles lend authenticity to tales, poems, or concepts related to particular cultures.

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